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The Duping Of Richard Helms

Material released by the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry suggests a new avenue of investigation for the congressional intelligence inquiries now getting underway: What can be done to prevent a President from using the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other secret security services for partisan political purposes?

In summer and fall of 1971 President Nixon saw Sen. Edmund Muskie as his likely opponent in the upcoming 1972 presidential election. A number of Nixon's advisers feared Sen. Edward Kennedy might emerge as the Democratic candidate. Nixon White House political strategy, therefore, called for attacking both Muskie and Kennedy. The publication of the Pentagon papers in June 1971, the ensuing court battle to prevent further publication and the indictment of Daniel Ellsberg for giving the papers to the press were all viewed by the President and his aides as helping them politically.

For the attack on Edward Kennedy, Nixon wanted to publicize what he considered failures of John Kennedy's administration. On several occasions in June 1971, the President asked his aides to find a way to get out the story of the Bay of Pigs. At one point, 10 days after the first Pentagon papers publication, he suggested that *Chicago Tribune* reporters Willard Edwards or Walter Cronkite be asked to demand release of previously classified Bay of Pigs material.

On July 2, 1971 White House aide Charles Colson told H. R. Haldeman that he thought Howard Hunt, a former CIA official, should be hired. In a memo Colson wrote to Haldeman that Hunt had been "the CIA mastermind on the Bay of Pigs. He told me," Colson went on, "that if the truth were ever known, Kennedy could be destroyed." In an attached phone conversation transcript, Hunt said "I've written my memoirs of that [the Bay of Pigs], but of course, I never published them."

Four days later Hunt was hired and two days after that, on July 9, 1971, President Nixon suggested that *Look* magazine might be a suitable place to publish Hunt's memoirs. In that same presidential conversation, Mr. Nixon discussed naming Gen. Vernon Walters as the number two man in the CIA—a move that was not accomplished for another 10 months. The President also talked about another former CIA agent, Lucien Conien, who had been active in Saigon for the agency during the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem. Hunt and Colson had talked to Conien that same day asking about the Diem assassination and the roles of Averell Harriman, Maxwell Taylor and Robert Kennedy. Hereafter Nixon asked John Ehrlichman to keep tabs on Conien, whose anti-Kennedy story they wanted the CIA to release.

At an impromptu press conference September 16, 1971, Mr. Nixon declared that the US involvement in Vietnam developed "through overthrowing Diem and the complicity in the murder plan of Diem." Two days later, at a White House meeting with Haldeman, Ehrlichman and then Attorney General John Mitchell, Nixon talked about a political strategy that would keep discussion of the origins of the Vietnam war "front and center" so that Democrats would "squabble about it." The "Diem incident" was picked as "the best ground" for attack since it involved both Harriman, who was considered a Muskie supporter, and Kennedy. Mr. Nixon suggested Republican senators, such as William Brock of Tennessee or Robert Taft of Ohio, could pick up his accusation of three days earlier and "demand Conien be released from the silence" imposed on him by CIA regulations. "Let the CIA take a whipping on this," former President Nixon reportedly said.

Mr. Nixon then ordered several specific steps be taken concerning the CIA to carry out the strategy of getting the story of the Diem murder out. He wanted the "entire Diem file" from the CIA. His aides were to tell CIA the story that his answer of three days earlier had been questioned and he wanted to prepare for an upcoming press conference. In addition the CIA was told to deliver the "full" Bay of Pigs file to the White House "or else." There also was to be a "speed-up [of] Walters to CIA" at Mr. Nixon's specific request.

Recognizing that the CIA might balk at delivering files, the President's men fabricated two stories. On the Bay of Pigs, they would say that since Mr. Nixon himself "was involved" he "must know all the facts." CIA Director Richard Helms was also to be told "the President is on CIA's side in these . . . [but] as questions arise they must be answered."

That same day a decision was made to request all State Department cables on the Diem coup. The President's name was to be kept out of it; the handling of the request and reading of the cables would be left to others, including Howard Hunt.

The assignment did go to Hunt who, on September 20, 1971 was given access to State's cable file on the Diem coup. The CIA, however, did not fully respond to the President's request as relayed by Ehrlichman. Instead Director Helms asked to speak directly to Mr. Nixon. At this point it is worth recalling that Helms and his agency had in the previous few months been subjected to a variety of White House requests. In early July they had been asked to do a psychological profile of Ellsberg; later that month and the next they had responded to requests from Hunt for false identification papers; a wig, a tape recorder and finally, a clandestine camera. Also, at about that same time, the agency undertook physical surveillance of newsmen at White House request. The only instance in which the agency is known to have balked was when Hunt's use of the clandestine camera—with which he took interior